TWO WHO LEARNED.

By
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IT works! The bubbles form—the colors break and glance," announced the old woman in smothered triumph. "Look, look, lady, how the oily surface lifts and heaves. It works!"

"The mixture boils," the girl standing by the hearth answered clearly and coldly.

The old woman drew herself nearer the brazier placed in the centre of the lofty, mediæval room, peering into the little kettle.

"Not yet, not yet, lady. It will not boil until the hour of moonrise; and the old moon rises late, near midnight. You would have me brew the liquor here, so patience must endure."

This time the girl moved, and the light flashed over her tall, deep-bosomed figure and powerful rather than beautiful face. The glint of jewels followed her movement, her trailing gown had the rich sheen of satin.

"I asked of you," she said deliberately, "what it is your trade to give—a poison. And because I do not trust you, I bade you make the draught here. At your pretense of magic and mystery I laugh. Let us have no folly. These men who grasp the hilt of power, who walk clad in the steel of authority, forcing us to their virile will—let one of them learn their defenselessness against a soft woman's dumb hate."

"Gemma, Gemma!" moaned the sweet, childish voice of the third in the room; a still younger girl who lay face downward on a couch in the shadow.

The other turned to her with a strangely blended tenderness and savagery.

"Well, what? Have they not driven us to this? Have we been asked if we desired to marry, either of us, this Duke Guido of Belfiore; this noble whose evil fame is common gossip throughout Italy, this man whom timid rumor accuses of having poisoned his brother and who has attained the ducal power through dim, hateful intrigues against his own kinsmen? Did our father consult us before offering this man the choice between us? No. Courage, then. I, woman, fight strength with craft, and lay hands on their weapons. Rest; this is my battle."

"Gemma, Gemma!"

"Rest, my sister."

"There should be peace in the air about the alchemist's caldron," pro-

tested the old woman in subdued warning. "I am no gypsy witch impostor, but one taught a hidden science. There should be calm in this place."

Gemma smiled in chill contempt.

"I have no belief in such jargon, good woman. The juice of a plant, a spoonful of powdered glass might serve almost as well as your mixture there. I come to you only because you are skilled in this lore, as better women are skilled in the lore of healing and the sick chamber. Do not tell me of superstitions."

The old woman lifted her eyes for an instant.

"You would not believe me if I said the dark legions of the air pressed around to watch these boiling herbs; yet, lady, what grim shapes are your own intentions! I say to you, that wherever man plots with man against the life and peace of man a thousand dark intelligences flock to join the conclave."

"Gemma, Gemma!" moaned the other sister in utter horror, her voice rising to a cry.

With her swift, decisive grace Gemma crossed to draw the slight figure into her embrace, kneeling by the couch.

"Hush," she soothed. "I should have kept you ignorant of this. If there is guilt here, whose is it? Was ever one more innocent in thought and action—were you, yourself, more maidenly gentle than I, Fiora, until yesterday we were told of this marriage?"

Fiora sat up, pushing back the short fair curls falling about her face.

"But we are doing wrong," she sobbed. "Dear, we are doing wrong. *I* will marry the Duke Guido, *I* will yield—send her away."

"You will marry him? You who already love our Cousin Valerio? Moreover, he can choose between us; you have nothing to say."

Fiora sank back, and there was a pause. Here in the closed room it was very hot. Outside, a storm was gathering, the muffled roll of thunder intermittently breaking the hush of the sultry night. Fiora's eyelids had fallen, either in sleep or passive exhaustion.

"Come, lady, who see no more in this kettle than seething grass," suddenly urged the old woman. "Come, look, the mixture boils."

Gemma rose and came to bend over the brazier, half disdainful, half curious.

"See you in the smooth surface the reflection of your own face, lady?"

"Yes, as in any liquid; except that the livid vapor wreathes and curls itself about the image."

"Speak softly. Do you not see the face of a man behind your reflection, as if he leaned over your shoulder?"

"I see a spot of light, as from the lamp."

"It is a man's face, young, even beautiful, but fatal to your hope. Lady, your plan will fail."

"Glamour and folly! Do you think I credit your dazzled sight? Ah! the spot of light grows—brightens——"

A frightful crash of thunder shook the room as the storm at last broke overhead, sending Gemma staggering back. With a long cry, Fiora sprang to the nearest window, and, dragging apart the heavy curtains, flung open the sash.

"Help, *Maria Santissima!*" she called in desperate fear. "Help; we fall into sin, we faint! Light, light!"

A glare of lavender lightning filled the room as the young girl fell across the window sill. The old woman spread her arms, crying out some incoherent words at which Gemma, springing toward her sister, halted.

"Spoiled?" she echoed. "Spoiled? Bah, by a girl's prayer! Will it kill, your brew?"

"Yes, yes," called the other, over the rush and uproar of wind. "It will kill, lady. But the finer essences are gone."

Gemma turned to raise the fainting girl whom the fierce rain was drenching.

"So I save her and give her to the man she loves, what to me are your essences or my life? Give me a potion that will kill—I pay."

"Gemma, Gemma," moaned Fiora, stirring. "Gemma——"

Across the dewy, coolly bright Italian garden, the Marchese di San Onofrio was hastening toward the white pavilion where his daughters sat together. Hastening with an eagerness which almost lost sight of dignity, an unusual color had been brought to the face which held more than Gemma's resolution without a hint of her softness. The marchese was excited; more, he was triumphant.

"He is coming to us," sighed Fiora, nestling closer to her sister. "Something is happening, I feel it here."

She laid one small hand over her heart with a gesture unconsciously dramatic, her white throat quivered. Gemma passed an arm around her, not at once replying.

"You are to be quite tranquil and trust to me, Fiorita," she said, when their father was near. "You promised me that last night."

Fiora lifted her fair child's face anxiously.

"Last night! Were we dreaming or waking last night? Gemma, it was all spilled and lost, that dark liquid—you said so. You did not mean to use it?"

"Zitto," cautioned the other. 'Hush; yes, I said so," and rose, drawing her up also.

Both girls curtsied profoundly as the marchese halted on the threshhold, and remained standing before him. But his first words shook their equanimity of training.

"The duke is riding up the avenue, an hour earlier than his letter appointed," he stated bluntly. "You will follow me to the villa. He comes with a single companion, and quite without ceremony."

Gemma had dark and heavy eyelashes; she let them fall to her cheeks now, veiling her eyes.

"And it was his wish to come absolutely incognito," the marchese added. "You understand? He will be presented as a private gentleman, and you will so receive him, not letting him perceive that I have told you this. Come, there is brief time."

It did not occur to him that there could be resistance. Nor was there; both girls curtsied again and followed in silence. At the villa the marchese went on to the great hall to welcome his guests, while the sisters waited in the huge, sombre salon.

"I am afraid," whispered Fiora, her tense fingers clinging to the other's.

Gemma made a warning gesture, fixing her clear, amber eyes upon the door. She saw her father enter, turn, and await his guests. She saw the two gentlemen beyond the threshold, as the younger and slighter of them stepped deferentially aside and allowed his companion to precede him into the room. And from that bit of courtierly byplay, she divined the taller man to be Guido del Isoletto, Duke of Belfiore.

There was little time for thought; the next moment the marchese was presenting to his daughters Don Luigi and Don Martin de Contarini, two kinsmen traveling from Florence.

Don Martin was the younger; a black-haired, black-eyed noble of a singularly glowing and vivid beauty across which sparkling animation played like a shifting light. The Don Luigi, to whom he paid such evidently mechanical and involuntary respect, was a dark-featured man whose haughty, restless face might have sheltered any thoughts. Looking at the latter, Gemma's lip arched dangerously, her large eyes glinted, bitter antipathy sprang Pallas-like to full life.

"We will go to breakfast," smiled the marchese.

"Signora, this honor——" murmured Don Martin with his brilliant smile, bowing before Gemma.

She held her attitude unchanged.

"Signore, Donna Fiora is my younger sister," she declared.

If her design was to force a tacit acknowledgement of Don Luigi's identity by claiming his escort due her as eldest daughter of the house, she failed.

"Signora, my kinsman has already that fair charge. Am I unworthy your graciousness?" he asked, his glance shaded by reproach.

Gemma turned quickly and saw Don Luigi indeed bending over Fiora's

"You would not believe me if I said a thousand dark legions of the air pressed around to watch these boiling herbs."

hand, his avid eyes on the innocent snow-and-rose face.

"Am I not worthy your grace, *signora?*" repeated the smooth voice.

She brought her gaze back to Don Martin, the giddiness of rage passing.

"Pardon; and thanks, *signore,*" she said, and gave him her hand. He touched his lips to the fragrant fingers before leading her from the room.

Don Luigi proved to be a cold and silent guest. At table he scarcely spoke unless addressed, contenting himself with watching the timid, distressed Fiora. The breakfast was only rescued from utter dullness by Don Martin's light, pungent wit and polished gayety. This was a courtier, Gemma thought, listening curiously; one of those who hold the favor of princes by dint of

charm and tact and keenness. She admired him very much, with the half-envious admiration we yield a bright-winged bird or shining butterfly.

When the sisters rose to leave, Don Martin stood up also and went to hold open the door. Don Luigi followed Fiora with his gaze, but made no move to rise.

"You are a better courtier than actor, *signore,*" Gemma quietly observed, half in scorn, half in playfulness, as they passed out.

signora, are not necessarily our friends. Shall I see you in the garden?"

"We will be there, *cavaliere.*"

Outside, Fiora stopped to hide her face in her sister's breast.

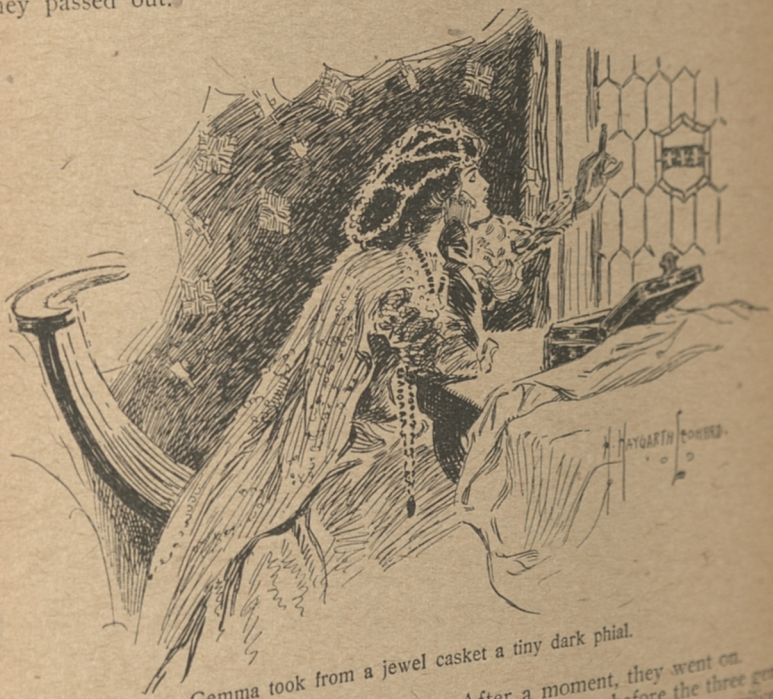
"Gemma, they frighten me so! That one—Don Luigi, his eyes freeze me with dread. He—he is the duke?"

"Yes."

"If he chooses me, I shall die."

Gemma stooped, and pressed her firm lips to the golden head.

"You will not die, Fiora."



Gemma took from a jewel casket a tiny dark phial.

Don Martin looked full into her face, his own gleaming with laughter.

"Read you our secret so easily, fair lady? Read, then, another open page; I would be your friend."

The moment was brief, their tones barely below the others' hearing, yet Gemma lingered.

"I do not share a friend," she declared, and turned the significant hatred of her glance toward Don Luigi.

Don Martin grasped her meaning at once.

"Those we find it convenient to use,

After a moment, they went on.

It was not long before the three gentlemen came out to the white pavilion. And they found three women awaiting them, for Gemma had summoned the old nurse who acted as duenna. Far from being pleased by the discretion, the marchese was distinctly annoyed. What the guests thought was not evident, but the situation was unsatisfactory in the extreme.

"Your gardens are very lovely, Signor Marchese," pensively remarked Don Martin, at last. "That is, as one

sees them from here. I should conceive those winding paths most entrancing to explore."

"An entrancing suggestion, if I may say so," approved Don Luigi dryly.

The marchese immediately rose.

"Good, good, *signori!* My garden is yours."

The glances of the guests crossed. Don Luigi left his chair, and offered his hand to Fiora, with calm assumption of the sisters' intention to accompany the promenade.

"*Signora,* this honor——" murmured Don Martin, bowing before Gemma.

"You are very clever," she conceded, slowly yielding.

"I am overwhelmed by your approval, *signora.*"

She looked at him with quick attention, for the first time endeavoring to see more of his character than lay on the polished surface. Smiling, he suited their steps to such slow measure that the other party of three gradually gained some distance ahead, Gemma interposing no objection.

"You dislike Don Luigi," he commented, when the space between was safe. "Yet many a noble lady would bear much to write herself Duchess of Belfiore. How our Don Luigi leans toward the lodestone of Donna Fiora's golden beauty!"

"He will take no duchess from this house," retorted Gemma, viciously frank in her anger.

"Not you, if his choice veer?"

She snatched her hand from his arm.

"I forgot; a courtier can recognize nothing higher than ambition. No, not me—not while our armory holds a dagger or our art a stratagem. Not me, not Fiora."

He stopped on an angle of the path, and turned his amused face to her.

"Read, read, *signora!* Ambitious I am, to a vice; but see you no deeper legend here than a hope satisfied by feeding on a prince's favoritism?"

Gemma regarded him steadily, her amber eyes lambent. She perceived now the power of chin and lip superficially masked by elegance of contour, the straight line of thought between the level black brows, the dominant will behind the mirthful gaze. Once the glamour of color and animation passed, the face was of a strength deadly in its possibilities. Her breath quickened.

"What are you?" she asked impetuously. "One of those nobles who chafe at Duke Guido's elevation, who would tear him down from the place gained by intrigue? One of those who themselves would rule?"

"Perhaps."

She drew a step nearer.

"One of those who would *kill* him?"

"It is not good for those who stand in my way."

"Nor in mine. Yet never was there maid more gentle than I, until he came. Now, now——" She turned aside her head. "If he touches Fiora, I could poison him, as he did his own brother Don Lelio."

Don Martin drew back, paling to the lips.

"*Signora, signora,* not that! What are you saying? Dangerous, unscrupulous, as he is, he was not guilty of that. Believe me, he loved Don Lelio."

"You know that? You knew Don Lelio, then, before he died?"

"All Belfiore knew him. He died by a trick of fate. Shall we walk on?"

She allowed him to replace her hand on his arm, and they moved forward. Intent on her own thoughts, Gemma balanced the chances of making this man her ally, of enlisting his aid in Fiora's defense.

"Even if you acquit the duke of his brother's death, you do not love him," she presently argued.

Don Martin snapped a bud from the laurel bush they were passing, and closed his strong white fingers over the blossom before letting its bruised and crumpled petals fall.

"I care no more for Don Luigi's life or death than for that flower's. Do you, *signora?*"

"I guard my charge," she said sullenly, and set her small heel on the bud.

He smiled, as they turned an angle

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in the path and found the others waiting for them.

Before the morning was over, it was evident that Don Luigi's choice between the sisters was made. He scarcely turned his eyes from Fiora, or spoke except in compliment to her. But he did not signify any decision to the marchese, nor did he fix any period to the visit.

"How long will he stay?" Gemma demanded of Don Martin, when they separated at noon.

"Several days, I think, *signora.*"

There was time, then. She saluted him, and led Fiora away.

Up in their secluded apartments, there was a tragic little scene after the sisters were alone. Fiora clung to Gemma in a passion of grief and fear.

"I hate him," she sobbed. "Gemma, I am afraid! He will take me away—I will never see Valerio again."

But after a while she fell asleep from sheer exhaustion. Then Gemma took from a jewel casket a tiny dark phial, and sat down, leaning her head on her hand. Noon slipped into afternoon, afternoon to sunset, while that reverie lasted. When at last she rose to prepare for evening, she put the phial in her bosom.

The evening passed on the moonlit lawn savored of Boccacio-like charm; brightened by anecdote and compliment, and even music. For at the marchese's command Gemma's lute was brought, and Fiora was obliged to sing in her sweet, tremulous voice. And because her voice was so pitifully unsteady, Don Martin took the lute himself and sang them several gay little canzonettas and ballads. Every Italian gentleman of the period sang, not always so well as this.

> Ohimé, the moment past
> Comes not again.
> Gone the falling star so fast,
> And night is pain.
> Ohimé, the dark!

Gemma turned from the rich, careless voice. What moments passing so fast as these last of her guiltlessness! What star falling from its place so bright as her lost peace! It was for Fiora, yet——

The singer had come to her side in the violet dusk; the faint, narcotic

perfume he wore stole across her consciousness as a part of his low speech.

"You avert your ears from my poor song, *signora?* Alas, how had I the courage to sing before so severe a judge! You press your hand above your heart, as if, as if——"

Her eyes sought his, startled.

"As if?"

"As if you concealed there a treasure, or a secret."

"Perhaps both," she retorted, but the hidden phial seemed to shine out accusingly through velvet and lace.

"Donna Gemma, if it is the portrait of a favored lover, a stiletto has pierced me."

"It is not," she answered.

"So; you are too proud for coquetry! The royal quality, the quality nearest my spirit. *Signora,* you should be a—duchess."

"You mock me."

"I adore you, stately breaker of laws."

Troubled, she locked her fingers together, feeling his keen scrutiny through the shadows. For the first time in her life she was trembling. Don Martin picked up the lute again, touching the strings.

> Comes a bird across the night,
> Swift of wing.
> Nest in my heart, heart's delight,
> Folded wing.

After a while, the party went in to the villa.

Before their parting for the night, the marchese detained his elder daughter at the foot of the staircase.

"You understand how affairs are going?" he asked.

"I understand," she answered dully.

"You know how I shall reply to the duke?"

"I know."

"And—you submit?"

She curtsied without words, and followed Fiora up the stairs.

The guests stayed three days. Time after time Gemma sat at table, with compressed lips and gleaming eyes, her bosom pressing against the dark phial with each angry breath, watching Don Luigi and the shrinking Fiora. Time after time she held her place in garden or salon, hearing with preternatural acuteness the compliments whispered into her young sister's unwilling ear, as the wooer urged his too-confident suit. And always Don Martin lingered near, with brilliant, inscrutable black eyes and smiling lips.

Gemma's resolve was to attempt nothing until the last hour. So many things might happen, she told herself. The pretended Don Luigi might die, restless Belfiore might rebel against an absent duke—one has always to reckon with chance. She could wait.

Quite early on the third morning, when she had descended to the garden in search of coolness and rest, Don Martin found her there.

"Alone, Donna Gemma!" he said only, but the tone sent the color to her forehead.

"My sister has fallen asleep, and I would not wake her," she explained hurriedly.

"Fallen asleep but now? Yet I see that you, yourself, are pale, as from a night's vigil. Donna Fiora has been ill?"

Sudden frankness impelled Gemma.

"Fiora has cried in my arms all night," she flashed, with savage truth. "Are we, then, but passive images, we women, that we may not feel and hate and love as do you men? Yes, *love!* I tell you she loves a gentleman of this province, her cousin, and your Duke Guido is as abhorrent to her as his meanest servant could be."

"I well believe you can hate, *signora.* I hope from my heart that I dare believe you can love."

She looked at him, surprised into strange agitation. His steady black eyes were too much to face, and her own glance fell again with the first timidity of her arrogant young life. Smiling, Don Martin moved nearer and possessed himself of one small, firm hand.

"Your love, Donna Gemma—what a gorgeous fire that will be! Fierce as your hate, rich as a crimson sunrise, dazzling as a flash of vivid lightning across a midnight sky; a gift for an immortal. But I think you will bestow

it upon some man less saint than magnificent sinner, some Lucifer of his little sphere. Tell me, could you love his daring faults, as he yours?"

Her breath came faster, her hand shook in his clasp; the sense of reality was gliding from her. His vivid, compelling face bent nearer her, his cool voice was a caress against her cheek.

"Tell me, could you love such a one, Donna Gemma?"

"Gemma, Gemma!" rang a sweet, high call, tremulous with anxiety. "Gemma——" The sound of eager steps came toward them.

Scarlet, Gemma snatched her hand away, and retreated.

"Go; pray go, *signore,*" she implored.

"I am going all too soon, *signora;* we ride from the villa to-day. Shall I come back?"

"Gemma, Gemma!" called Fiora, from the path beyond.

"To-day? To-day?" She turned to him, panting, and suddenly white. "Don Luigi goes to-day? Oh, you would not play with me—he goes, when?"

"After the noon meal," said Don Martin, his composure never more perfect, his smile never more warmly bright.

Gemma sank down on a bench, pressing her hand over the invisible phial. She scarcely saw Don Martin's withdrawal, scarcely realized her surroundings, until Fiora knelt beside her and flung desperate arms about this solitary protector and refuge.

"Gemma, Gemma, they are going—they will make me accept this betrothal, I know. I am afraid; I want Valerio! Gemma——"

Mechanically, Gemma returned the embrace, holding her close.

"Hush," she soothed, herself still dazed. "I will take care of you. He did not offer to help, but he will not interfere. It is my task alone. Hush, hush."

And for the time being, Fiora accepted the vague comfort.

The morning moved on, but the marchese said nothing to his daughters of the impending betrothal. He was radiant with content during these days, and markedly gracious to Gemma, as if from her he had not anticipated this submission.

The two girls remained in their own rooms until near noon. Then Gemma came forth alone, carefully attired, her hair braided with jewels, ready to do all honor to the departing guests at their last meal.

The villa was very silent. Not even a servant saw the quiet daughter of the house glide down the wide stairs, across the hall, and into the dining room. There the table was laid in readiness.

For a long space Gemma stood sombrely contemplating the board. Her figure tensely erect, her handsome head thrown back in sullen defiance of her own scruples, her amber eyes fixed on Don Luigi's waiting place, she was an incarnate Judith or Jael. A bee buzzing above a salver of fruit seemed to fill the hushed room with clamor, a curtain moving in the breeze started a dozen menacing shadows. But at last she moved forward.

At Don Luigi's place—as at all—stood a goblet of some sweet, heavy wine. Stilling with one hand the noisy rustle of her satin robe, Gemma drew from her bosom the phial, and shaking free the stopper, leaned over the cup.

"Well played," commented a cool voice at her shoulder, strong white fingers closed lightly around her extended arm. "Well played, brave heart, but played wrongly! Strike the right quarry."

The phial slipped from her grasp, and rolled tinkling from table to floor, spilling all its contents in transit.

Trembling with shock, Gemma turned, to encounter Don Martin's amused black eyes.

"You!" she stammered fiercely. "You stop me—you prevent——"

"Grace for an offender, fair judge and executioner. Let poor Luigi live—I am Guido del Isoletto, that Duke of Belfiore whom you have sentenced."

"You? You?"

"I, *signora.* Reverse your verdict of the first day; I am a better actor than courtier. I wanted my incognito, and I drilled Luigi to his part. Of course your father knew, but then he did not suspect *your* confusion."

She put her hands before her face, and blindly moved away.

"Would you leave your lord so discourteously, my Gemma? So much for sovereignty! Come, your father has watched my wooing approvingly, even exultantly; come you to me."

Still, she moved gropingly toward the door. He laughed a little, and followed, stepping before her.

"So firm in going? Must I buy, then, and tell you that I will marry your Fiora to any man she chooses? Come—or do you hate Duke Guido, be who he may?"

She dropped her hands then, crimson from throat to temples.

"You mock me," she flashed passionately. "You feign to love me, who know what I planned to do! You——" She stopped before the brilliant, laughing face.

"Lilies to the clear water," said Guido, drawing her to him, "stars to the cold sky, but flame to flame, my duchess. I love you."

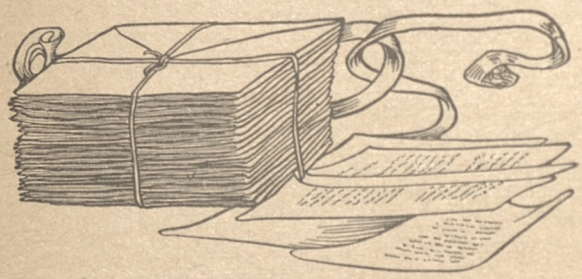
After a time, still holding her head against his shoulder, he made a gesture toward the dark stain on the tablecloth.

"But that is a bad weapon, my Gemma; it is too apt to strike wrong. Oh, I am guilty of much, if not all report accuses; but the night my brother Lelio died I promised him to toy no more with poisons. We are through with such phials, not so?"

Her arms suddenly returned his clasp, the "gorgeous fire" blazed in her eyes.

"I have learned; I might have killed you—— I love you!"

He stooped to kiss her.



"HALLUD."

YAS, Hallud, he's mah baby.
What's dat? Don' know de name?
You ain't er Christian, maybe?
Ef so, you ain't ter blame.

You reads yo' Bible eve'y day?
Dat sholy is er shame!
You ain' fin' whar de good book say
"Hallud be thy name?"

—Henrietta Lee Coulling.